

IVOR MILLER

# Guerrilla artists of New York City

In the early 1970s, the New York City subways burgeoned with a new art form. While Norman Mailer and a handful of writers and photographers celebrated the phenomenon, others saw it as an attack on society. By the mid-1980s, NY City's young guerrilla artists had developed their craft to produce full car murals that became a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world. To regain control over the subways, New York mayors Lindsay and, later, Koch initiated and sustained a multi-million dollar campaign to erase the paintings and arrest the painters. While the passionate and bold murals have vanished for ever from New York's subways, the art form has become a worldwide phenomenon with adherents in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and all major US cities. In New York, the original painters still call themselves 'painters', 'aerosol artists', graffiti artists' or 'writers', and the most dedicated of them continue to create their work in public spaces and for art galleries.

Since the beginning of their movement in 1971, New York City subway painters have used diverse cultural ideas in their creative processes. Most of the great painters were young (between 12 and 15) when they began. At that age, they were especially conscious of and open to cultural motifs from the world around them: their families taught them movement and language from their particular heritage; TV taught them advertising techniques; currents running within their communities taught them something about politics and the history of

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*Ivor Miller* is in the Department of Performance Studies, Northwestern University, and is currently researching the existence of Afro-Cuban religion in contemporary Cuban society.

their oppression. Contemporary phenomena like advertising and popular culture, and social movements like Black, Latin and Red power, resonate in the work and attitudes of subway painters. This blending I define as 'creolisation', and several innovators among this group of rebellious artists creolised images and ideas from the society around them to create their work.

Writers grew up within the kaleidoscope of cultures of which Chinatown, Little Italy, Spanish Harlem, Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side are a part. Their familiarity with cultural diversity helped them transform their segregated society into a city-wide community that included hundreds of creative youth. Initially, they communicated their awareness of each other by painting signatures on the trains. From the South Bronx, Phase 2 says:

We communicated when we were just doing signatures. Back when Stay High 149 was painting, everybody used to like his signature, so we used to write it on the trains. We would write his name, say '149', write our name next to his and point to his name. Then later we would see he wrote our name, and then write something next to it.<sup>1</sup>

Originally, groups of writers met at certain train stations to watch the latest style innovations and to form painting crews. Many passionately recall the individual creativity that was encouraged within a unified group of writers. From Upper Manhattan, Co-Co 144 affirms that aerosol culture was a spontaneous response to a need for multicultural unity:

The movement broke barriers. We were at a point where, after the 50s and 60s, there were the gangs, and you couldn't go into a neighbourhood, neighbourhoods were put into pockets like Black Harlem, Spanish Harlem, and the Upper West Bronx. This movement is something that broke negative barriers and created unity. It did so many things at one time. It was totally pure [positive]... Our intentions weren't to deface property. It was a call for unity – even amongst people who weren't writers. A lot of people that I met would be surprised to meet me. 'You're Co-Co 144?', and there you'd strike up a conversation, and they would look up to you and say how great you are, and where they'd seen your name and how many times. It wasn't to fluff yourself up like a rooster and be egotistical, it was something real nice, very positive and constructive.

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of the aerosol movement was its creation of an inter-racial youth culture at a grassroots level. As writing groups formed, each painter brought his or her own cultural style and perspective to the art. When a new piece rode by on the rails, other writers would study it, incorporating the styles or images they liked the best into their own work, and a fresh style would be born later that night in the train yard.

Comradeship between writers formed because they needed mobility to get their names up around the city, and there was safety in numbers. Thus, to move through the grid of neighbourhoods divided by rival gangs, writers formed 'crews' that could move together, and could watch out for each other while painting in the train yards. The communication that existed through the call and response of train paintings and within the groups who made them helped create an integrated culture not reflected in adult society. The powerful self-identity 'All City'\* writers created through painting gained such momentum that it literally dissolved the rigid segregation enforced by gang structures in many barrios. From the South Bronx, AMRL/BAMA speaks:

A lot of what happened back then cannot be explained easily because it was like a coming together of minds. To me, I always look back and think how amazing it was, because you had a bunch of guys with the same kind of mental attitude going out to do something. When it was really rolling, two years after it began, we're talking about three or four thousand writers that could communicate peacefully all over the city, and shared ideas. And that kind of activity was not happening during that time, there were too many gangs out there and all that madness, and yet these cats came out of nowhere, didn't even realise what they were doing, and created a major network in the city, communication from Brooklyn to Manhattan in a day, without the use of a phone, it was really tight.

It is not clear whether this integration was an influence of the consciousness created by the Civil Rights movement with integrationist ideals, the spontaneous result of youth needing to express a shared inner-city, multicultural experience, or whether it was found through a common desire to rebel against an uncaring system. Urban youth, growing up in segregated neighbourhoods, acted upon their visions of an integrated society, and many had to struggle against the long-standing prejudices of their families and neighbourhoods to do so. Phase 2 speaks:

We're not living in an atmosphere that tells us to love your brother, and harmonise with everybody, or teaches us how to deal with somebody that speaks Spanish, or Arabic or something or another. Because where I come from, you judge people's personalities depending on where they come from. You don't judge them as people. You say, 'Well, what do you expect from a [so and so], he's this colour, or from that part of town...' Yet this art brings all of the cultures here together as one. Maybe if this art was not from a

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\* A term writers use for those whose names are up in all areas of the city.

'ghetto',\* there would be a different approach to the art from our society. If it wasn't just a bunch of kids who weren't expected to make anything with their lives anyway. All this art came up from the gutter. This art brings the masses together.

At a time of life when youth need to explore the world, ask questions and express their new thoughts and perceptions, a lot of their energy was spent struggling with poverty, fighting the boredom of unchallenging school classes and defending gang territory. From the Lower East Side, Lee reflects:

A lot of people don't realise the impact the writing movement had in the neighbourhoods, because the gangs were still around. The gangs kept neighbourhoods apart, the city was a jigsaw puzzle of gangs keeping turf and territorial rights. So this movement brought people together: Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Whites, Orientals, Polish, from the richest to the poorest, we were equals. We took the same energy that was there to stand by your block with bats or guns and flying colours all night long, and used it to go painting, to create.

What counted among writers was how innovative and powerful one's style was, not what one looked like. From Queens, Lady Pink says:

Writers came from all ethnic backgrounds, all classes, and the police knew to look out for a group of kids who were racially diverse – those were the writers. If a gang was all black or white the police wouldn't bother them. In the early 70s race wasn't an obstacle for writers to join a crew, gender wasn't either. That set in later. Barriers break down quickly when you go down into the subways. It's like being in Vietnam. After you come out, you have a link, a comradeship. Once you were a writer, you were respected, you could go anywhere in the city. You were known, you had friends and connections, even if you had never set eyes on them before. It was a family.

Aerosol art was born from similar creolising processes that gave the world Afro-Catholic religions like Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé; Southern creole and Cajun cooking, and urban musical forms like Salsa, Latin Jazz, Be-Bop and Hip-Hop music. Unlike post-modernist strategies, which emphasise the dismantling and breaking up of traditions, creolisation tends to synthesise existing fragments together into a seamless whole. It often requires that the cultural producers be receptive and spontaneous in grappling with new ideas. Phase 2 believes some creole forms are created by the ingenuity of people who need constantly to create food, language and lifestyles from the meagre materials available to them:

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\* Phase doesn't like the term 'ghetto', because he feels it is pejorative. For people who live in poor barrios and projects, this is their home and their community.

We live here in Babylon and we learn what we learn from here. But a lot of us take what we learn and become inventive with it. When we came over here from Africa, we took what we were given and did what we could with it. We were never given so much anyway. They gave us the guts of the pig, and we made it into some type of southern gourmet dinner. It's always been that way, we get seconds all the time. Even with the second-hand education we receive, we have created a new form of painting.

Vulcan agrees with Phase 2 that sophisticated cultural achievements can be created with minimal resources and determination. His description demonstrates the parallels between the creation of Southern cuisine and Northern aerosol art:

Everything that we did with the spray can was done by trial and error. There were no teachers. There were no books, no schools. I grew up reading comic books. I was never taught to draw. The only thing I wanted to draw was pieces, letters, and draw them wilder and wilder. We evolved from spray painting one simple letter into these complicated styles.

Trains, spray cans and pop culture are all products of industrial societies that coerce people to work, or get them to buy products. Writers took these industrial artifacts, designed to be passively consumed by them, and actively reshaped them to create their own culture. In fact, they literally reshaped the spray-can nozzles in original ways in order to meet their creative needs; they infused the trains with their spirits by painting their signatures on them; and they created personal statements using advanced advertising techniques from the ads imposed upon them by Madison Avenue. Phase 2 describes how the images that influenced writers were transformed on the trains:

They try to make you think that everybody's influenced so much by these Pop artists, Futurists, Surrealists and Vaun Bodé,\* but the creative guys are going to *feed off* of Bodé, they're not going to copy his art to the letter. It's good to be able to copy something, but it's even better when you can take something and make it your own. That's basically what I think has been done with writing at this point, it's *our* writing now, you see what I'm saying? Whereas when we were babies growing up, learning the ABCs, now people have to learn *our* ABCs.

Aerosol art springs from an attitude of constant rebellion against the assimilation demanded by mass marketed culture. Seeking to advertise the uniqueness of their identities, writers developed an inclusive culture

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\* Vaun Bodé was an underground comics artist whose colourful, bold and sexual characters inspired many writers. Downloaded from <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/> at Kwantlen Polytechnic University on April 22, 2015

based on creative principles. Spar reflects:

We were kids faced with a world that said 'It's got to be done our way. You've got to live with it.' So we as kids just wanted to change that.

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Many New Yorkers saw the writers' work as a plague menacing the quality of life in the city. Subway paintings were to them a symbol of the lack of control New York's government had over its population. Of course, most people were upset that writers disregarded the 'sanctity' of private property. Yet part of this reaction was because writers confronted New Yorkers with their brutal experience by painting it on the trains. Sharp speaks:

Egotistical and violent emotions come from living in a lower-income area in NYC, and interacting with people there. I've seen my friends get shot, I've seen people die around me from overdosing, I've seen people jump off of buildings. For me to survive within my community, I have to be removed emotionally from these goings on. I need something of my own, an escape or radical refuge, and writing has always been it. Me being a writer during my teen years was a way to vent all that anger and all that frustration in a positive way.

If the experience that the black English vernacular relates is unacceptable to the institutions of the United States, then of course the painted scripts that are visual counterparts to that vernacular are rejected also – especially when they command a landscape where millions of New Yorkers see them daily. Vulcan, a writer from Harlem, explains:

The whole meaning behind the art is that it's a communication language... My main thing is taking letters and distorting them, changing them, mutating them. It's about evolving the alphabet. Just because somebody said this is the way it's supposed to be, it doesn't mean it has to be; you can individualise the alphabet. You can make it your own.

Many writers recall the long hours in public school, being taught to write 'correctly' by copying line after line of academic script. Out of boredom, out of a need to create, writers rebelled against this type of rote 'learning' which is designed to train students for subservient jobs, where following a dull routine is required. Phase 2 recalls:

I was totally bored with what I was being taught in school. To me it was tired. Even in elementary school it was tired. Ages ago I abandoned what they taught us in text books. I always found a need

to do something different. I used to be able to print so perfectly that the script was just retarded. Even writing with the left hand looked better than printing the way that they taught us.

Sharp recalls how writers abstracted the alphabet to redefine it:

We have for years been doing variations of the alphabet that we were taught in school, and elaborated on that to be Wild Style, and other things we were painting on the trains. They became more and more illegible, so that it is an 'attack' or a 'redefinition'.

Writers' redefinition of the alphabet was simultaneous with their creation of a written language that is the basis of their own culture. Vulcan says:

When the trains were running with paintings, kids would stand out there all day, and they could read everything that went by, even the complicated Wild Style. Yet people that ride the trains every day didn't have a clue to what it was, they just see the colours and the design. They don't realise that right there is communication going on. The writers and aficionados can see it, every car, every name, they can read. So it is a language in that respect. An underground language, not one that you would study in school, but a language none the less.

Living in the inner city, the majority of writers have little knowledge about their cultural heritage, where their ancestors came from and how they lived. Yet it is clear that an African-American cultural heritage provides a base from which many writers construct and improvise their pieces. In Spar's words:

The media makes a form like this seem totally new, yet it is connected to our history. You listen to Cab Calloway, if that's not Hip Hop, then ... what is? It's not like somebody saw some Africans dance and then created burning (an early form of break dancing). It just developed. It was not self-conscious. It's related to the group effort. It's related to ancient days, the dancers, the people scratching records like the old drummers, and the artists, who decorated houses and made costumes.

Whether consciously partaking in African-American traditions or not, many writers work within cultural sensibilities that have been passed down for generations in the Caribbean and the United States.

By creating a visual art form using the interaction of motion, word and rhythm, writers have transformed the dance, voice and drum rhythms Spar speaks of into visual elements. Some writers describe the stylised letters as human forms in motion, an image heightened by the movement of the trains. The human voice becomes visual in the 'shout' of the name riding across the city-scape on elevated trains, and the

musical metre becomes the rhythmic patterns used to structure aerosol paintings.

Visual rhythm shapes the letters writers use to spell their names and statements. Re-inventing the Roman alphabet to project African-American ideas of rhythmic style, some master painters have developed scripts with dancing characters, rhythmically pulsing and coming to life with the movement of the trains. Listen to Lee:

Have you ever seen Wild Style? The letters are movements. They are actually images of people. The way some Rs are styled, they look like they're dancing. Some of the letters look like they're hitting each other, and the Fs, they look like they're trotting along. And the movement of the trains brings them to life. It's an instantaneous communication. It's not only that you're saying 'Yah, I'm Bad because I did some Wild Style'; some of the writers were expressing their spirit ... in the 70s you were considered nasty if you could make Wild Style lettering that was unreadable to even writers. But I think writers didn't look and see what kind of figure was being created from the painting. Because it wasn't letters any more, there's something else in there. It's not words, it's not a name any more, it's more of a living thing that you have created, because every letter has a character to itself, and the writing on the subways definitely showed that. The way some of the letters were trucking, and some of them looked like they were dancing across the cars. And that's why the paintings did come to life when the cars moved, and the movement was a big part of it. Art in motion. It brought a whole spectrum of colour and meaning to it. But it's done unconsciously.

Phase 2 creates complex structural designs, like visualisations of jazz improvisations. He does this by building off the lines created by letters, making visual rhythms. In this way, his letters are no longer phonetic symbols but have been expanded into abstract ideas. He says:

Language to me is infinite. If somebody created it, you can create yours. English is just semi-relevant. Words have just been made up [and applied arbitrarily]. If there is a god, he didn't make these words, and say this is officially this, and this is all it can be. Twenty-six letters aren't enough for me. To me, letters are nothing but tools to go beyond to something else.

Letters are structures that you can build off of. Do you look at a building and say, 'What does this building mean?' – or do you say, 'That's a beautiful building'? Do you have to be able to read hieroglyphics to be able to appreciate them? I can relate to hieroglyphics as a form, and the form relates back to me in terms of my African (Alkebu-lan)\* roots. I don't sit there trying to figure out what it

\* 'Land of the Blacks', according to Phase 2.



says. It has poetry of motion just being there.

Many of my letters tell a story, they are always moving forward. They almost represent motion, and almost represent individuals. It's not even a theory: I look at them and that's what I see.

In his raps, recording artist Kool Moe Dee displays a parallel attitude of building rhythmic images with language, of using letters and words as structures. His attitude towards language reveals a close relationship of rhythmic rapping to aerosol rhythmic lettering, of individual style in spoken language to innovation in complex Wild Style signatures:

I don't write I build a rhyme  
I draw plans draft the diagrams  
An architect in effect.<sup>2</sup>

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The injection of rhythm into the Roman alphabet is one facet of the creole process developed by subway painters. The way writers creolise images of super heroes and self-created characters into their signatures is yet another. According to Lee:

Many paintings with characters were like self-portraits of the writers. A painting was more than just a name, writers probably wanted to take a look at themselves when the train rolled by, they wanted to get as close to looking at themselves as they could. It was a mirror in a way.

One of the original pop culture symbols used on the trains was 'the Saint' icon from the TV show of the same name. Used by Stay High 149, aka Voice of the Ghetto, it suggested the sleekness, intelligence and secretive powers of a world-class undercover agent. Some writers gained fame by associating their names with popular icons. Others visualised their self-images and sources of personal power by depicting original symbols related to their ethnic heritages. Phase 2 has incorporated ancient Egyptian symbols into his work:

I paint profiles in some of my work. Some people might say they're Egyptian, but they're not really, yet they go back to my roots. It's instinctive. In fact, since I was a kid, the relationship with Egypt and Africa, subconsciously, was right there. I remember a cartoon with Bugs Bunny, and my man Bugs had an Egyptian head-dress on, and he's doing the King Tut [dance]. It blew my mind. I've always said that I'll go to Egypt and there's going to be some ancient statue that will resemble me. I know this. People can believe what they want, but the spirit never dies.

Co-Co 144, of Puerto Rican descent, has integrated Taino ritual images into his signature.

I have incorporated many meanings into my name, and the way I incorporated the Taino petroglyphs into my signature is one of them. The continued use of writing my name in my paintings is important to me. Although the letters are now an abstract form, the name is still there. It's in the face of the embryo I painted in some of the Taino paintings I did.

When I was painting the Taino works, I was feeling that I wanted to express myself and my culture in a certain way. Since I was in Puerto Rico, where these petroglyphs were created, it was a way for me to introduce my work. And it was a new experience for Puerto Ricans to see urban, aerosol art. At the time, I didn't make a conscious connection between the Taino paintings and aerosol as underground work, but it's funny that my work evolved from the underground subways, and then here I'm combining it with something that was done 700 years ago that was also done underground. It's like history repeating itself.

Writers testify to the reality of their lives through their art. Ezo, one of the few aerosol painters to write a manifesto outlining the underlying political concerns of many inner-city painters, states that:

Phase 2, Sharp, Lady Pink, Futura 2000 and others are some of the few artists who share a common idea: to use their anger to chip away at the misconceptions that are woven in our daily lives to entrap and confuse. What are these misconceptions? To begin with, the idea that our society has the ability to repair itself in its present condition; that our situation is tolerable and will continue to be so if it's left alone.

Protest and self-affirmation are inherent in both the music and visual art of this inner-city renaissance. Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five came out with 'The Message', 'Survival' and 'New York, New York'. Melle Mel rapped the apocalyptic 'World War III', with lines like 'War is a game of business', and 'Nobody hears what the people say'. Writers painted names like 'Cries of the Ghetto', 'Slave' and 'Spartacus', and eventually dominated the subway system with whole car paintings depicting the violence of their lives: images of guns, gangsters, and political statements like 'Hang Nixon!' abounded. Subconscious though it may sometimes have been, the large-scale, collective motivations of writing culture reflected some of the important issues of the day. Jon-One says:

Aerosol is definitely something from the era of the sixties and seventies. It was a very rebellious time in history. The first generation of writers, Miko's generation, they were going outside and tagging on ice cream trucks when everybody else was rebelling against riding on the back of the buses. They had the Vietnam war protests, JFK was president. From those times until now, aerosol has become an established art form.

The anger and frustration youth felt around them from their parents and communities, the resilience and hope for new possibilities that came with the emergence of new Black, Latin and native American consciousness, were translated into a green light for artists without tools, without canvas, to paint it loud, to create their art, by any means necessary. The 'subterranean guerrilla' artists', as Lee calls them, invaded the city's nerve centre, the subways. Painter and gallery curator Renny Molenaar reflects:

Graffiti is the one way, the only way that we have made our presence felt. Whether it's the art or the tagging. The government has always acted as if we don't exist here. Millions and millions of us [Latinos] have migrated here, and the black people who have been here for centuries. They make believe that we don't exist. Third World people. You walk into the trains and wham!, you know our presence is here. We are not present in business, the government, in the movies. We were no where, with some exceptions. This is one of the few ways to make our presence known.

Co-Co 144 gives us his perspective:

I knew all those [political movements] were going on. Although I didn't understand why Puerto Ricans were living in exile and marginalised, I could feel the pressures of the environment. Society started conditioning people to believe the stigma that a Puerto Rican is a dishwasher, or a Black is a shoe-shiner. Unconsciously that is one of the reasons that we wrote. You go downtown today and you see that most of the doormen are Puerto Ricans or Dominican. I think that growing up and seeing these things, we wanted to express ourselves and say hey, 'This is Co-Co and this is what I'm about, and I'm not going to be another waiter or a dishwasher.' Unconsciously it was a way of screaming out and saying, 'This is me, and I'm not your household door man!'

Lee saw his paintings as an avenue to awaken the deadened spirits and the repressed sensibilities of New Yorkers. He saw himself as a Pied Piper in an anti-imperial struggle:

I call writing 'Silent Thunder', because it is something that lays dormant in everyone. Everyone has an expression to let out, and some people know how to vent it. It's like a thunder, that wants to just pound, 'Boom!', but it's quiet.

Writing is very spiritual to me. I look on the subway cars themselves, literally, as a part of my message. They are the central nervous system of the city, you know, I'm able to contact a lot of people through those subways. Just looking at those monsters, made of steel, they are like slaves. They are just sitting – waiting for the imperialistic country to bring its clones to its factories to pump out more bombs.

In retrospect, Lee regards his paintings as an attempt at readjusting the distorted values of its downtown corporate workers:

You know what it was? We infiltrated a system that was so sick of itself, a system that festered on itself, that is destroying itself ... in other words, we threw colour into a grey wall, we took a brick, cracked it in half, threw paint at it, and put it back together again. That's what happened. We broke a mould. We literally cut into a fixed society, a fixed way of living – people take the train, go to work, go to the movies, go to bed – day in and day out – then whole car murals came in front of you, and they're not normal. They make you start to think, well, who *is* normal? Is it the ones that are painting the trains, who are really expressing themselves and able to be free to do something like that in such a moulded system?

Several writers recall the joy they found in painting, simply because it was done for free. Many subway paintings were created as a public gift, a rare thing in a society where even the earth, the water and time itself are bought and sold. From the Upper West Side, Jon-One says:

It kept me going every single week, wanting to paint another train, wanting to make people happy to ride the train. You walk around the city and everything costs money, everything is expensive, and here you ride the train, somebody's painting on it for free. It's bugged out!

To this day, many resist categorisation by the art dealers and gallery owners, refusing to gear their work to a consumer market. Co-Co 144 speaks about United Graffiti Artists (now United Urban Artists), the first organised group of writers, and how they resisted cooptation:

When we got organised at UGA, this awareness developed about who we were, what we were about, and how to value ourselves. Because to a certain extent we were labelled as 'those ghetto kids'. When you value yourself you begin to value the things you do.

We did have offers from certain companies, and we felt at that time, of not selling out, of not becoming another Peter Max. We didn't want to get involved in one commercial product and then in all kinds of products and commercial companies that want to play you out and then – there goes your art.

For example, we were offered something by a carpeting mill. They wanted to do carpets with names on it. We wondered: where they would put a carpet with a name on it? It would be a fad, with matching curtains – 'Make your house look like a subway station'. Why do that? What's more important – money, or the integrity of your art? We wanted to be fine artists. We wanted to keep the content of our art.

Through the organisation of art dealers in the early 1980s, many subway painters became famous as 'graffiti' artists in New York City and, eventually, in Europe. Here the work was captured on canvas; the motion of the train paintings was halted. The art became 'westernised', and acceptable to the upper strata of society. Lady Pink writes:

There seems to be considerable contradiction between the nature of what was produced by the 70s graffiti writers and what is now being created by the 80s artists.

Painting on canvas or a gallery's walls removes the element of risk, of getting one's name around, of interaction with one's peers and one's potential younger rivals. The pieces in galleries cease to be graffiti because they have been removed from the cultural context that gives graffiti the reason for being, a voice of the ghetto.

Authentic graffiti cannot exist in the sanctuary provided by the galleries and museums.<sup>3</sup>

Some collectors had tags painted on their living room walls; others hung canvases in their homes depicting painted subway cars. Some artists who had little or no connection with writers and their culture became famous as 'graffiti' painters. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Sharf and Keith Haring became known to international audiences as representatives of the culture. Yet the more they painted, the less the public knew anything at all about subway painting culture. Jon-One says:

Look at the whole hypocrite scene, you don't have to be blind. Who made the whole spray can movement? Yet in the multi-million dollar business, who is recognised as aerosol writers? Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and they never even painted trains. And you talk about graffiti to anybody, and they go, 'Oh ya, I know Keith Haring, he does really nice graffiti.' He never even painted a train, you know?

But Phase 2, a working-class person who cares for the integrity of his art more than for money, rejected many gallery offers. He reflects:

We created an art form that came from the letter. The medium that it belongs on is the subway. There is nothing that can compare to it being on the trains. What's so crazy is that these guys deny their history to jump into something that's easier, for the dollars. They deny their birthright. It didn't come from outer space or the galleries. It can be shown in galleries, but that's for the advancement of art, to educate. It belongs on the trains.

Writers like Phase 2 were also culturally unprepared to deal with the gallery business world. They couldn't just paint one hundred pieces for a certain date to fill an order. They were young, capricious and rebellious, not ready to fit their work 'into' a market. Haring, on the other hand, was middle class, and culturally prepared to pick up on

what galleries wanted. For him, aerosol painting was one style among many, that he could accept or reject in his work as gallery demands changed. Writers like Phase have no choice about accepting or rejecting their culture because it's an integral part of their identity.

Disregarded by, disillusioned about, or simply uninterested in the galleries, many artists continue to this day to develop and paint new styles in their barrios. Says Kase Two:

There's always going to be plenty of more styles to come. I've got Futuristic Style already in my mind. Just by looking out my window [from the tenth floor of a project building in the South Bronx] and seeing all that stuff out there, that gives me ideas. Seeing everything, the bridge, the buildings, the trees, the antennas, the pipes and the poles on the roofs. Everything I look at gives me an idea, but I keep it as an abstract ... I can get an idea for a signature from looking out at the city.

After a ten-year campaign to erase all train paintings, in 1988 the MTA succeeded. Using razor-tipped fences, guard dogs and a police force, the Transit Authority kept writers from the trains. Thus, writers began to paint walls and canvases to keep their form alive. Meanwhile, through picture books and video tapes made about original subway painters, young artists from Europe, Australia and New Zealand now take inspiration from New York masterpieces. Says Vulcan:

While the trains are now clean here in New York, all over the world there are thousands of kids who do this art, and they get attention and shows, and are being hailed as artists in their own countries. This is in Australia, England, Norway, Denmark, California, New Zealand. I get letters from all over the world. Sometimes I just look at my mail and don't believe it. A few years ago, nobody in Australia had ever heard about subway paintings in New York, and now I'm getting letters and phone calls from there! It's a worldwide thing. We, the writers from New York City, gave other writers from around the world a programme to follow.

## References

- 1 This article is based on taped interviews with aerosol painters in New York City from 1987 to 1992. The author wishes to thank Jill Cutler for her generosity and help.
- 2 Kool Moe Dee, 'I go to work' from the album *Knowledge is King* (Zomba Recording Corp., 1989).
- 3 Catalogue for 'Stoopid Fresh: Queens & Hip Hop Culture' (New York, Jamaica Arts Center, 1989-90).